

Memo for the record
(dictated by Daniel Ellsberg, July 1971)

Meanwhile, during this whole period, I was working on a project I had been given by Harry Rowen in late February or early March of 1961, to draft the Department of Defense proposal for a new "basic national security policy" (BNSP). President Eisenhower had, I believe, initiated this series of annual statements, formulated and debated at the NSC level, as the statement by civilian authority of the objectives and guidelines to serve each year as the basis for all war planning within the Department of Defense.

Under Eisenhower each BNSP had embodied the "New Look" and "Massive Retaliation" doctrines of Dulles and Radford, emphasizing "main but not sole reliance" upon nuclear weapons as opposed to non-nuclear. In fact, this emphasis was expressed in a trend toward describing nuclear weapons as "conventional." Since for some time John Kennedy, as a Senator, had been associated with a critique of Massive Retaliation similar to that of General Taylor and others, and an espousal of what Taylor called the "strategy of flexible response," it was understood that a significant change in the policy doctrine of war planning was in order, and it was assumed that this should take the form of a radically revised "basic national security policy."

Already in February Bill Kaufmann of RAND had briefed the Secretary of Defense on some proposals within the Air Staff aimed at moving away from what Herman Kahn labeled a "spasm" concept of general war (or as Kahn put it more privately, a "war-gasm") toward a capability for sustained and controlled "war fighting" even in general war, focused on military targets. Kaufman had been involved

with the Air Staff planners interested in this concept in preparing their briefings throughout 1960, with much help from RAND. It would have been natural, then, for Harry to assign Kaufmann - who was also working as an ISA consultant in Washington at this time - to draft the general war section of the new BNSP; but somewhat to my surprise, Rowan asked me to draft that section, and instead assigned Kaufmann the task of drafting a limited war section. I knew that my own views as to how policy should be written and how strategy and capabilities should change were closer to Rowen's than Kaufmann's were, and I presumed that that was why I was given the job rather than Kaufmann. This encouraged me to undertake the drafting as a process of refining and making concrete my own views as precisely as possible, with the expectation that the end result would probably be acceptable to Rowen. This proved to be the case, though in the course of this I sought a great deal of detailed input from Kaufmann's and other RAND writings, from RAND alumni like Alain Enthoven, Fred Hoffman, Frank Trinkl, Dave McGarvey, Malcolm Hoag, and others then serving as officials or consultants in the Department of Defense, and from the Air Staff officers with whom I'd been working over the past two years.

The concept of "war fighting" or "damage limiting" favored by some sections of the Air Staff involved prolonged and controlled "counterforce attacks" upon a military target system in the Soviet Union and the satellites, including precise attacks against hardened missile sites and command control centers. This concept called for increased numbers of high performance bombers, capable of penetrating Russian defenses - either flying underneath the radar or higher than the range of air defense missiles - to deliver high payloads more precisely than missiles could do; thus it gave support to the Air Force

proposals for the B-70 bomber program (now the B-1) a consequence that doubtless was not unrelated to the Air Force enthusiasm for the approach. It also implied a crash effort to improve the accuracy of missiles (an objective then thought to disfavour the Navy's mobile missile, the Polaris, in favour of land-based missiles controlled by the Air Force) and meanwhile to increase numbers of missiles to make up for their inaccuracy against small and hardened military targets.

The merits of the argument, on the basis of the best available calculations, as to the extent that damage either to the target area or to the United States could be limited by such an approach, did not impress me. It was obvious, then as now, that nothing, could be relied on very far to limit damage to less than catastrophic levels once the process of general nuclear war was underway. Thus, there was an incalculably vast premium for all nuclear powers on deterring, preventing and avoiding a general nuclear war under any circumstances. But if - given the inventories of weapons already existing, such a war should nevertheless commence, what seemed to offer relatively more promise than the Air Force's plans for "damage limiting by controlled counterforce attacks" was a strategy aimed at terminating the war as quickly as possible, before all weapons on both sides should have been employed, and particularly, before any, many, or all had been employed against urban targets. This meant both deterring, if possible, an opponent from launching strikes against U.S. and allied cities, and inducing the opponent's command authority to stop operations short of expending all his weapons.

Both of these objectives called for three characteristics in our own planning and operations: avoiding enemy cities in our own initial strikes - instead of removing, with their proposed or actual destruction, all restraint on enemy planning or targeting; maintaining protected

and controlled U.S. reserve forces under virtually all circumstances, to preserve a threat capability in order to terminate the war; and preserving on both sides a command and control capability capable of controlling reserve forces and terminating operations. Neither I nor Harry Rowen had at that time any illusions that any such planned measures had any high likelihood of achieving the desired affects either on enemy planning or on the course of hostilities; although the likelihood of having some desirable effect seemed distinctly greater than with the proposals focused exclusively on counter-force tactics, let alone the current planning and posture, which did not provide for either terminating the war or limiting damage in any other foreseeable way. However, planning toward the three characteristics above did have a number of desirable effects on our own posture quite apart from whatever effects they might or might not have on the actual course of a general war (though such planning was rationally defensible in the latter narrow context). First, it implied that there were some choices to be made by the highest surviving U.S. authority even after general war hostilities had begun: namely, for example, what threats to make, what terms to set for the termination of hostilities, the use of reserve forces and the actual decision to terminate operations. Given the nature and urgency of such decisions, it was obviously desirable that the President himself, or at least someone having his full confidence, be physically capable of making such decisions after general war had begun, and that meant preserving him physically and preserving a reliable communications capability.

Moreover, given that the President or his representative would have to contemplate such choices during the war, there came to be a rationale for the President to inform himself and his civilian

advisors before the war of the detailed nature of proposed war planning. Third, and perhaps most important, once it was admitted that presidential capability to command should be preserved during the war, and once physical measures had been taken to achieve this with high reliability, there could no longer be strong military objections, on the basis of physical reliability, against implementing physical controls over nuclear weapons which would make it impossible, or at least greatly reduce the likelihood, that lower commanders could mistakenly or insubordinately initiate the use of nuclear weapons on their own.

Thus, the strategy of limiting damage by effecting the conduct of enemy operations and by terminating the war, and of doing this by threatening the use of reserves against as-yet-unhit enemy targets, not only required plans and preparations to preserve both U.S. reserves and crucial enemy targets throughout the early stages of nuclear war, along with presidential command authority and communications, but it justified, well before hostilities, presidential involvement in the war-planning process and physical safeguards against accident and unauthorized action. Finally, by focusing critical attention upon the current plans for the prompt destruction of urban targets under all circumstances of general war, such an approach opened up the possibility of a strategic and moral critique of such plans, currently regarded as beyond question because essential to deterrence.

Such an approach called for so drastic a change in both plans and preparations from the posture that had developed since 1953, and especially since 1956, that it seemed clear that the basic national security policy should be drafted in considerable concrete detail, rather than being the brief and vague document which the

military had come to expect in the years when it simply reaffirmed the existing New Look doctrine. Moreover, although in principal the BNSP merely defined national policy rather than arguing it, some of these notions had become so unfamiliar in strategic dialogue that it seemed desirable to smuggle in as much rationale as possible, both to undermine resistance and to introduce the planners to considerations that had not recently appeared in military writing.

On April 7, 1961 - which happened to be my birthday - I finished the first draft of a BNSP and sometime afterward had a finished product. This took the form of a 12-page discussion of goals, contingencies and requirements, intended to make both the desired changes and the reasoning for them fully explicit to the military planners working on the JSCP and subordinate plans. Moreover, I drafted an earlier section of objectives specifying national objectives in "central war." In order to avoid the previous ambiguity of the meaning of "general war," the distinction was used in this draft between "local war" and "central war," the latter defined as: "War involving deliberate nuclear attacks, instituted by government authority, upon the homelands of one or both of the two major powers, the United States and the Soviet Union." Local war was defined as "any other armed conflict."

Both the objectives and the draft plan itself, which follow below, would probably appear totally commonsensical to any reader unfamiliar with the history of strategic disputes and with earlier planning or current posture; and so they were, except for the fact that almost every sentence constituted a radical challenge to and departure from some fundamental characteristic of the then-existing plans and preparations. Even a high civilian planner in the Defense Department - having been kept unfamiliar with the details of these plans and preparations by military bureaucratic secrecy - could have

been expected to wonder why it was necessary to specify such "obvious" considerations in such explicit detail. Why bother, for example, in the highest-level policy document, to mention the need for maintaining reserve forces? The answer, implausible, was that the highest-level war plans for the United States at that time called for the immediate expenditure of all weapons as soon as they could be made operationally ready, under all circumstances of initiation of general war: In other words, these plans, and all supporting training and preparation, not only failed to provide for the maintenance and possible subsequent commitment of any tactical or strategic reserves - the core consideration in classical military planning - but they positively required that there should be no meaningful reserves.

Thus, in order to explain to the civilian officials who would be first considering this draft why the discussion of such length was required, as well as to justify for them the specific contents - knowing that the attack from the military bureaucracy was likely to focus, disingenuously, upon the details and the "unnecessary" length of the document rather than upon specific contents - I accompanied the draft with two other informal documents of my own; called "Relation of Current Plans and Posture to Proposed Requirements" and "Short-term changes necessary to implement the plan," to make quite clear the discrepancies between this plan and the current posture and the need for the changes.